

Mary Stella Okolo: *African Literature as Political Philosophy*

(CODESRIA Dakar and ZED Books, London, New York, 2007, 164pp; ISBN 978 2 86978 204 pb (CODESRIA), ISBN 978 14277 894 4 hb (ZED Books), ISBN 978 1 84277 895 1 pb (ZED Books))

Roseline M. Achieng'

*Department of Anthropology and Sociology
University of the Western Cape, Private Bag X17, Bellville
E-mail: rachiang@uwc.ac.za*

Whilst trying to rejuvenate a culture of critical societal¹ analysis amidst deteriorating or fast non-existent epistemic communities engaged in enlivened meeting of minds, African social researchers have been grappling with two parallel and not so contradictory processes. On the one hand is, given the complexity and oppositional African social realities, the desperate need for a multidisciplinary approach in order to understand and make sense of these contradictory processes, is evident. On the other hand is, faced with four generations of social analysts, with different educational, political, economic and social backgrounds, which to a large extent shape their outlook and analysis of societal problems, a meeting of minds in an intergenerational and comparative manner has to occur. The question is how this is to proceed?

Mary Stella Okolo's current book, which won the CODESRIA Doctoral Prize 2005 awarded to her treatise: *Exploring literature as political philosophy through a comparative study of Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o* (p. iv), captures the essence of how a meeting of minds read intergenerationally, comparatively and multi-disciplinarily can occur. The *raison d'être* of Okolo's book, which forms her core thesis and which she defends through comparisons of the context, the content and intellectual discourses of the two writers vis-à-vis each other and in relation to other writers of international recognition, is that an imaginative and conscious writer who bases his/her writings on a critical appraisal of social reality is a critical political philosopher and is as an imperative a positive social transformer². Her thesis upholds the quest by a branch of African social analysts who maintain that the science we engage in has to be socially responsive and responsible and not only dwell in the realm of abstract ideas (Platonism). Her thesis

further gives reason to the continued engagement in the humanities (literature, music, arts and history) despite the struggle from several fronts that these sciences have lost their applicability in an age where more 'technical' sciences are the drivers of society's development into a 'golden age' of prosperity.

The book, which is a logical build up of seven chapters that explore, critically interrogate, compare and give everyday examples in defence of different dimensions of the above mentioned thesis, commences with drawing an affinity between two quite opposing disciplines, i.e. Literature (creative writing) and Philosophy (love for knowledge, a deep appraisal and giving meaning to lived realities). This difficult marriage of two opposing scientific disciplines is however made possible through Okolo's analytical categories which she outlines as (pp.5-28):

Both disciplines have a common search for:-

I. A moral basis

- a. raising self consciousness
- b. the realisation of a good society
- c. bringing forth what is good for humanity
- d. critical reflection and civic consciousness
- e. prompting people to critically evaluate the existing societal arrangements, beliefs and practices with a view to justify their continuation or a need for positive transformation (my own emphasis)
- f. creating an awareness for the possibility of positive change (my own emphasis)

II. Theoretical/Academic basis

- a. in the deep reflection of social reality
- b. in the search for explanation of occurrences
- c. in the conceptualisation, analysis and clarification of these occurrences
- d. in theorising about these lived realities
- e. in the usage of language

III. A political-economic and socially embedded basis

- a. in the search for better societal conditions (common goods in society)
- b. in its social functions
- c. in its ultimatum of the protection of human life
- d. in its moral basis in the equitable sharing of societal common goods (see pp. 5 – 28)

To demonstrate how, in my view, this multidisciplinary approach as a methodological stance for comprehending and making sense of every day reality can proceed, Okolo provides an analysis of Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1970) *Petals of Blood* and Chinua Achebe

- (1987) *Anthills of the Savannah*. Her choice of the two books is informed by
- i. the deep contextualisation that both books offer
 - ii. the search for a new order that departs from the prevailing status quo that the two books explore
 - iii. I have to add here the difference in historical peridodicity which not only explicates the two different orientations in the search for a new order that the two authors exhibit but underscores the daunting question of whither ideology.

The beauty of offering such a comparison lies not in the recounting of simplistic factual events but in the multi-disciplinary interpretation of events of the here and now with the there and then and bringing to bear the raptures, continuities and discontinuities and in this manner locating and giving meaning to social action and interaction. In my view, this is one way of the how of engaging in a comparative and/or multidisciplinary methodological stance and which also lies at the core of making sense of everyday realities with the aim of searching for a new and better order of things.

The second captivating aspect of the book is the desire that Okolo, the young generation writer, creates in us in seeing how she transcends and harmonizes the scientific foundations of the West and the rest of us and us in comparison to ourselves. In this sense, she uses the *mirror* effect in order to better understand African lived realities from different contextual *niveaux*. Again, in my opinion, she provides a second strong basis on how one can engage in a multidisciplinary methodological approach through using different scenario settings, intellectual traditions and context analysis in a comparative sense and with a mirror effect to gain a deeper comprehension of every day occurrences with the aim of offering higher level interpretations and thus give appropriate meaning to these lived realities. This is the self reflexivity that is advocated for to demonstrate that one is engaged in making science and not merely recounting stories and past events/events that occur.

The Outline of the Book

Pp. 3-4 captures in a precise manner the essences of the seven chapters, which thankfully, do not need to be recapitulated here in. Whereas, we have explored the main elements in chapter two (2), of importance and where our concerted attention needs to be drawn are the following chapters, four (4), five (5), six (6) and seven (7). These chapters raise thought provoking conceptual discussions that cannot be ignored and to the best of my judgment could form an interesting starting point for a long ranging debate in the different myriad of issues the author in a very articulate but mind rousing manner brings to the fore. For example, whereas Chapter Four (4) explores Achebe's ideological linings mainly based on a reformist agenda, Chapter Five (5) explicates Ngugi's Marxist

and revolutionary political stance. Chapter six (6) raises two issues which Africa is still grappling with, these being the issue of dependency on the one hand and how liberation could occur and on the other hand the role of leadership in social change.

What is crosscutting in the chapters outlined above is Okolo's positive obsession with a new political order driven by ideology/ideologies. In resurrecting ideology as a debatable theoretical stance for the realisation of a new order, one is at once reminded of the debates of the late 80s and early 90s among a group of scholars whether ideology is indeed fruitful for Africa (we have to bear in mind that this is when some of the political ideologies like *Ujamaa* were beginning to show their ugly faces). I share Okolo's passion in bringing back ideology, translated as ideas/concepts/ guiding principles and ethos of what a good society ought to be. I further share her cautious stance in explicating that these conceptualisations and principles in realising a good society should not be prescriptive, for these then are apt to being instrumentalised and exposes society to the dangers of technocracy and thus making the former easily malleable. We have to bear in mind that because of their *ideos* nature, ideology can be politicized (as exemplified on pg. 116) or they can be catalyzed to bring about positive transformation (again as exemplified on pg.116). The country case of Tanzania under *Ujamaa* and South Africa under Mbeki's *Ubuntu* are vivid examples of how a prevalent ideology is exposed to the two variables i.e. instrumentalisation and /or providing catalytic change. In my view, the thin dividing line is how a balance can be maintained - the subject of which is ripe for an intergenerational debate.

In the three chapters outlined above, Okolo interrogates two opposing ideologies – a revolutionary agenda vs. a reformist one. It should be pointed out that whereas the debate on whether a revolution or a reformist agenda could be interesting in itself, it could easily lead to an intellectual deadlock. We have to bear in mind that Ngugi was writing in a particular historical period, which meant thinking concertedly about a clean cut from the colonising system in order to contemplate from another slate and salvage the little that could be called one's own. Now, Achebe provides an oppositional stance emerging from another historical period with a completely different set of variables, where he advocates for a reformist agenda, i.e. piece meal change. In essence it means retaining aspects of the dominant system and seeking to progressively transform these. Of course here the danger is: at what cost does one do this and how? One can easily fathom the directions of my thoughts in a previous article³. Whereas this is not our immediate concern, I will maintain that for the third/fourth generation scholars, the debate and dialogue with the first and second generation scholars on whether ideology could be a starting point in thinking through which way for Africa.

Chapter 7: Which way then for Africa's structural transformation? is the paraphrased provocative question that Okolo begins with in her concluding chapter. Here, she starts by interrogating whether a Marxist or a reformist agenda could be the way to realise a structural transformation for Africa. However, she skilfully concludes that what is called

for is a sociological examination and analysis of the institutions, people's agency and processes that could allow for a society where people can freely realise their potential and perform their duties and obligations (p.137). This, in my view, is her translation of what common goods are in her ideal type good society. Reading this chapter, one is reminded of the current ideological wind of change sweeping through Africa where scholars, activists and policy makers are joined in arms in advocating for the establishment of Democratic Developmental States (the DDS Project as is currently acronymed, this being the ideal type good society that aims at sharing, protecting and advancing societal common goods for its people). The mechanisms, as partly explicated in Okolo's concluding chapter, are indeed in the making.

It is no small achievement that this exemplary book is written by a third/fourth generation female social scientist. I would strongly recommend it as a must read for African scholars of the different generations for it raises several contemporaneous and important questions. Because of their immediacy, two can be singled out. These are:

The continuing discussion on the how of multi-disciplinarity and comparative research as methodological stances for African environments

The question of order and the contemplation on how to bring about a new societal order, which, as has already been touched upon, is the current major preoccupation in intellectual, civil society and policy making circles.

An After-Word

There is nothing a friend can offer another friend in arms who has suffered contradictory emotions from jubilation to unfathomed grief and loss and living through the trials of making sense of these...Mary, may the intellectual torch sustain its brightness through the darkness that might be threatening to engulf it. We await another of yours....
Roseline

Endnotes

- ¹ Societal is here taken to mean the social, economic and political institutional arrangements found in a given society
- ² The concept transformation is usually applied uncritically. However, one notices that transformation can be qualified both as negative or positive change of the status quo of an existing order
- ³ Code-name conflict: An antithesis to it's transformative potential, 2005, CODESRIA Bulletin, Nos. 3 &4, Special Issue, 11th General Assembly: Rethinking African Development, Beyond Impasse, Towards Alternative, pp. 58 61